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Developing a community service program for high school students

Abstract

Youth leadership development within community service allows teenagers to serve others, to lead, and to contribute to society in ways that support positive roles, personal values, and communal beliefs in justice and equality. Ideally, community service learning builds supportive structures for youth leaders, encourages positive dialog around new relationships, and empowers others as competent and purposeful individuals.

Learning is not merely answering a teacher's questions to get a grade, but asking oneself questions to understand and to know what to do. When learning is from real life, and the consequences are real, one may have to question the surface appearance, the easy answer, and grapple with the deeper complexities of life and relationship.

DEVELOPING A COMMUNITY SERVICE PROGRAM FOR HIGH SCHOOL
STUDENTS

A Research Paper

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and Postsecondary Education
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In Partial Fulfillment
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Masters of Arts in Education

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Ellen M. Hoefer

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Today's communities are filled with children who live in fear of adults and with adults who are uneasy around children. In the United States, the average household has two televisions. These televisions have enabled children and adults alike to form vicarious relationships with celebrities' images instead of more genuine, meaningful and intimate relationships. It is often overlooked that all television programs are educational, that they teach values and behavior of all sorts. Marketing experts continue to convince the viewer that "more is better" and that he or she should look out for himself or herself. These same television viewers know that every boy or girl in his or her heart would rather steal second base than an automobile. Subliminally, children understand that the true riches received from adults are time and attention. It is these treasures that we can draw on through community service activities. This is what has the inherent appeal to a guidance counselor at the high school level.

In acting as service providers, young people break through the limiting definitions of themselves as immature teenagers and passive, dependent students. They assume roles of significance and affirm new roles through meaningful interactions with others. Young people are given the opportunity to enter new settings, encounter unfamiliar people from whom they gain new information and understanding, and generally broaden their world. These adolescents are able to increase the range of places and people they know about and with whom they feel a connection. Not only do these providers serve others, but they also gain a great deal of insight into and affirmation for themselves. "For the person giving service, responsibility is more than obedience to external rules. It becomes a personally felt obligation to fulfill commitments to others" (Hedin & Conrad, 1991, p. 77).

Overview of Community Service

Community service can be seen as an umbrella term for those programs in which adolescents give assistance to cities, neighborhoods, families, and individuals through various projects. Often times, community service has come to mean a court-ordered sentence for those who have committed crimes. Since this meaning bears negative and punitive connotations, the term service-learning has replaced the term community service. These two terms are closely related, but differ in one minor way. Service-learning is directly correlated to the academic curriculum of a school system, whereas community service is not. Boss (1995) clarified this difference in defining service-learning as “an instructional strategy in which students are involved in experiential education in real-life settings and where they apply academic knowledge and previous experience to meet real community needs” (cited in Minnesota Department of Education, 1992, p. 20). The term community service and service-learning will be used interchangeably throughout this paper.

History of Community Service

There is a history behind the concept of community service, and this history began with a leading education expert, John Dewey. Dewey dreamt of the creation of “miniature communities” in which students would work together to identify and respond to problems they confronted (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996). His dream incorporated analytical as well as academic skills, and combined them with moral insight and social sensitivity. It was his hope that, in developing these “miniature communities,” the members would learn to critically assess and respond collectively to very real problems. Dewey expected students to transform their values and beliefs through these experiences. Furthermore, Dewey and other educators

of his time believed that they could change the world by manipulating the curriculum of the school in this manner (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996).

Dewey's approach placed an emphasis on charity rather than change. Today's service-learning, in comparison, strives to produce change. It is the hope of service-learning that, by engaging in meaningful service, students have opportunities to experience the joy of reaching out to others and making a difference in the lives of others.

Policy makers, legislators, and educators have promoted community service initiatives at the local, state and national level. The results of their efforts can be seen in The National and Community Service Act of 1990 and President Clinton's National Service Trust Act of 1993 (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996). These acts are some recent and far-reaching examples of the community service trend. Today, many of the service-learning programs are funded by city and statewide initiatives.

Mandatory Community Service

Many students take part in volunteer activities either in their school or community; some as a condition for graduation from high school. When requiring community service as a condition for graduation from high school, controversies arise.

Mandatory community service presents two major problems. The first major problem is that students and parents are not included in the indoctrination process of this requirement. The requirement is merely imposed on the students without a clear understanding of why the requirement has been put into place. The second major problem is ensuring that service is motivated by the culture of the school, school values, the working partnership between students and staff as well as the working partnership between schools and communities,

rather than by an authoritative mandate. It is the author's belief that students should not be forced to serve as it makes them resistant thus defeating the positive outcomes of community service. The concept of "mandatory" volunteerism registers quite clearly with students as an oxymoron.

There is increased attention to such social problems as violence and substance abuse among adolescents, on the one hand, and alienation and apathy on the other (Miller, 1994). Some educators and politicians see mandatory community service as one of the answers to these problems. When community service is required for graduation, the number of service hours is set. These service hours can be attained throughout the student's high school career. Some districts even offer options for Saturday, evening, or summer activities to participate in for completion of the requirement (Howard, 1993). Typically, class discussions are conducted, and students have to complete research or write papers proposing a rationale for a particular type of service. After performing these activities, students reflect on the meaning of the experiences by writing papers or delivering speeches (Howard, 1993). Documentation may include validation of service hours through the receiving agency on a service learning card. These experiences are usually noted on the student's personnel record or career portfolio. Some school districts choose to offer community service as a class to meet this graduation requirement.

Advantages of a Community Service Program

There are many advantages to offering a community service program within the school system. Students are able to benefit in a wide variety of ways. Kendall (1991)

outlined these ways when she stated that students:

- develop a habit of critical reflection on their experiences, enabling them to learn more throughout life,
- are more curious and motivated to learn,
- are able to perform better service,
- strengthen their ethic of social and civic responsibility,
- feel more committed to addressing the underlying problems behind social issues,
- understand problems in a more complex way and can imagine alternative solutions,
- demonstrate more sensitivity to how decisions are made and how institutional decisions affect people's lives,
- respect other cultures more and are better able to learn about cultural differences, learn how to work more collaboratively with other people on real problems, and
- realize that their lives can make a difference. (p. 94-5)

In this paper, the author will focus primarily on the effect of community service upon adulthood, in regard to personal growth and career-decision making, and briefly touch upon its influence upon social responsibility and cultural differences. Markus, Howard, and King (1993) recommended that service to one's community and nation be utilized as a means to "bridge the gap" between youth and adulthood. It gives adolescents "opportunities –mostly absent from their busy but self-involved lives—to do values and needed work" (Harrington, 1992, p. 36) Adolescents may not feel useful, needed or important during this stage of development; community service activities give them the means to do so. Furthermore,

community service provides the opportunity for students to work with adults in the community. "Going into the community requires planning to arrange schedules and transportation as well as interactions with peers, teachers, and (usually) outsiders in new ways" (Jones, Maloy, & Steen, 1996, p. 38). Through these interactions, students are seen in a positive light by many adults. Additionally, more opportunities are made available to students and adults to interact on a personal basis and infuse additional adult role models into the educational process (Shumer, 1994).

Community service yields opportunities for career exploration. Students are able to "engage in new roles with responsibilities as productive contributors: tutors, caregivers, mentors, or mediators" (Jones, Maloy, & Steen, 1996, p. 2). With these new roles, students are able to try out new relationships. These relationships enhance the students' personal development and also increase their sense of responsibility to the community. The community service experiences take the students to various facilities and enable them to study the facility as well as the possible careers available throughout the organization itself when participating. Consider the student who works in a local hospital. This student analyzes the work environment as well as the specific job tasks performed by people in these positions. Community service is motivational and offers students the opportunity to connect their future goals with their current education.

One of largest selling points of implementing a community service program is that it emphasizes social responsibility and commitment to social concerns. "Students receive few opportunities in school to make decisions or to learn about social problems through participatory experiences" (Crockett, 1994, p. 73). The community is seen as an extension

of the classroom (Beane, 1990). Through their service, students are asked, at least implicitly, to address social problems with direct action. Students offer help to those with visible needs: the homeless, senior citizens needing care, other students not making the grade, or those who are angry and threatening violence. Through community service experiences, adolescents learn that they can address specific problems in their communities in a proactive way. Furthermore, these programs seek to build relationships across geographic, occupational, and age boundaries as well as class, race, and gender divisions. After students accumulate a variety of personal relationships with people who are ordinarily seen as 'different,' they often ask why such stereotypes prevail.

Disadvantages of a Community Service Program

When looking to develop a new program, one must also consider the disadvantages. These will be the points in which opponents of the program will use to justify their position. By considering these disadvantages, the developer of the program can take steps to overcome some of them or lessen the overall effects. There appear to be two main disadvantages: exploitation and logistics.

First, one must always one must always confront the question of the potential exploitation of the students who take part (Haskvitz, 1996). In organizing the projects, the developer must make sure that jobs are not being taken from members of the community. The projects should center around the community needs that have been neglected year after year. Secondly, the logistics of the program will be challenged by the opponents. How the projects are chosen and the nature of teacher feedback during reflection can either open up student concerns about unequal power distribution or close them off. When certain topics are

legitimately discussed by adults, student development is stifled and no evaluation measure will find much evidence of deeper understanding of self in society. "Some students never become engaged by the particular activities or are so wrapped up in personal issues that they cannot open their thinking to frank discussions about self-identity and the impact of society on orthodox roles and relationships" (Jones, Maloy, & Steen, 1996, p. 44). If these community service programs are offered for educational credit, how the teacher will assess the students' work must be carefully considered. "Merely counting hours spent on the job doesn't seem relevant" (Haskvitz, 1996, p. 163).

Rationale

There are theoretical rationales supporting community service in public schools. The most positive influence of community service on identity development can be found in Adlerian theory. According to Adler, social interest is "an enduring concern for others and readiness to act on their behalf, which is essential to development of a healthy personality. Adler maintained that individual psychological health and stability depends on a healthy union with the community" (Middleton & Kelly, 1996, p. 132). Therefore, according to the Adlerian perspective, community service provided by adolescents should promote health personality development.

There are also moral, political, and intellectual rationales for developing a community service program. The moral rationale emphasizes charity or giving. The aim is primarily to deepen relationships and to form new connections or a new sense of caring for a given population. Participants in community service try to consider the life and disposition of those for whom they are caring. An attempt is also made to understand the reality of the

given population. Many times participants struggle for progress with the recipient. With the recipient's reality becoming a reality for the participant, the distance diminishes between the one caring and the one being cared for. As a result, opportunities are created for changing the understanding of the other and the context which he or she lives. Adolescent youths should be encouraged to give something back to their school or community. Through these community service projects, the "emphasis is on giving and on countering the narcissism that is believed to be so prevalent among young people and in the society generally" (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996, p. 596).

The political rationale is focused upon two notions. The first centers around the idea that "to be properly educated in a democracy, students must undergo experiences that demonstrate the value of altruism and the dangers of exclusive self-interest" (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996, p. 595). This notion stresses civic duty and the need for responsible citizens. The second notion makes assumptions regarding the fundamental requirements of citizenship. This belief "emphasizes critical reflection about social policies and conditions, the acquisition of skills of political participation, and the formation of social bond" (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996, p. 595).

Overall, responsible citizens and critical democrats are the desire of the political rationale. "The primary purpose of community service learning is to prepare students to become enlightened citizens who can participate in society with dignity, sensitivity and wisdom" (Boss, 1995, p. 20). Through experiential learning, adolescents develop competencies needed to be effective leaders in their communities; skills which they can replicate in other arenas, such as in college settings and on the job.

The intellectual rationale hopes to “foster authentic, experience-based learning opportunities, to motivate students, to help students engage in higher-order thinking in contextually varied environments, and to promote interdisciplinary studies” (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996, p. 595). Overall, it seeks to promote powerful learning environments where students interact with those less fortunate than themselves. Adolescents experience the joy of learning while using the community as a classroom.

Community service programs provide opportunities for personal growth and the exercise of responsibility (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Raskoff, 1994). These programs most commonly enhance the personal growth of the service provider in areas of self-esteem and social responsibility (Shumer & Belbas, 1996). A positive sense of identity is strengthened by feelings of competence or efficacy. Adolescents frequently suffer from low self-esteem as well as a struggle in identity and social responsibility during this time of development. Strengthening these intellectual characteristics requires practice in real-life experiences where problem solving and success can be accomplished. Jones, Maloy, and Steen (1996) stated that “when one acts as a caring person, as a student leader, as a learner and a teacher, as a mentor and an apprentice, as a person who crosses cultural and gender boundaries” (p. 40), then one learns appropriate ways of communicating and of forming relationships.

Practical Application

“The pressures for college admission, academic rigor, and success on standardized examinations make the high school perhaps the weakest link in the current service-learning environment” (Kraft, 1996, p. 141). West Delaware High School in Manchester, Iowa is not an exception to these pressures. Juniors and seniors in high school find themselves in need of

community service experiences in applying for scholarships. It is becoming more common that colleges also ask for such experiences on college entrance applications. The majority of the student body has difficulty listing such experiences. Some students are unable to reach out to find such experience. Some of these students are not resourceful enough to find their own activities. Others overcome this difficulty by participating in events announced at school; however, these are often few in number. Some students are nervous about contacting an agency's volunteer coordinator. These students merely need to build up the courage, call, and make necessary arrangements; all of which is built into service-learning.

Service-learning has been associated with school-to-work transition. Efforts including apprenticeship, tech-prep, outcome-based education, substance abuse prevention, and dropout prevention are enhanced through service-learning programs. The school-to-work movement has enhanced the learning process by bringing students into work settings that they might not otherwise experience. Service-learning offers unique advantages over internships and field trips. "Internships, for example, are not always linked directly to the curriculum; field trips may provide one-time snapshots of social groups but do not allow for sustained observations or the development of relationships" (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Raskoff, 1994, p. 248). Service-learning, in comparison, offers the setting as well as the content for learning.

Effects of Community Service Programs

Research has shown that community service learning has a profound effect on students' social, personal and moral development (Adams, 1993; Boss, 1994; Maher, 1992). Students between the ages of 10 and 18 usually see the number of family rules decrease while opportunities for participation in decision making increase. These students are often

providing service for the very first time in community service programs; they are amateurs in a way. In being amateurs, they offer themselves as individuals with talents and abilities, raw as they may be. These adolescents are experiencing dramatic change in their cognitive, emotional, physical, and social growth and development, all of which have implications for their capacity to learn (Crockett, 1994). “The purpose of school-based community service would be to encourage the development of personal (e.g. self-esteem, moral/values), intellectual (e.g. critical thinking skills, risk-taking, future orientation, achievement motivation), and social (e.g. social responsibility, civic participation, appreciation for diversity, political efficacy) development among students” (Miller, 1994, p. 181-182).

Academic and Intellectual Development

Students’ academic learning was significantly enhanced by participation in course-relevant community service. Markus, Howard, and King (1993) pointed out that students in service-learning experiences received “higher course grades, were more emphatic in their judgments that they were performing up to their potential in the course, and were more likely to affirm that they had learned to apply principles from the course to new situations” (p. 416). Boss (1995, cited in Levinson & Felberbaum, 1993), supported this when stating that at-risk students who engage in community service as part of their curriculum have higher grades in language arts and mathematics, as well as fewer class absences.

Community service activities can reinforce academic skills. For instance, peer tutoring can often increase the academic skills of the tutor as well as teach the person receiving the service. In some activities, the students are able to “demonstrate the value of scholastic abilities in real-world contexts” (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996, p. 597). Other

activities may promote interest or insight into complex social issues. Community service experiences are radically different from those students normally encounter. The cognitions of adolescents are challenged when students encounter ideas that conflict with their accepted world view. This is why reflection, through either journal writing or discussion, must be included in the comprehensive community service program.

Social Growth and Development

Social growth and development focuses on how to interact with different types of people and also how to get a task done. "The social agenda in service learning reflects a commitment to personal transformation and social change" (Haugsbys, 1991, p. 99). The special areas where service learners work are those that address some of the underlying problems behind the obvious social issues. Service-learning is concerned with advancing the "common good" through programs and projects that include persons from various ethnic, racial and religious backgrounds, as well as varied ages, genders, economic levels, and those with disabilities.

Middleton and Kelly (1996), (cited in Calabrese and Schumer, 1986) stated that adolescents reported less alienation after a variety of service activities. Community service changes the way students think about other people by bringing them into contact with people they might otherwise never get to know. These experiences help to challenge students' beliefs. In addition these isolated adolescents also "realize something personal in return for helping others" (Woehrle, 1993, p. 42). A new understanding of others in less fortunate circumstances emerges. Service experiences may also impart or reinforce commonly

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accepted values such a sense of justice, compassion for others, or an acceptance of the obligations of citizens.

Personal Growth and Development

Community service exposes participants to new and different situations which in turn can help facilitate personal growth and development. This development occurs on many different levels in many different areas, a few of which will be briefly discussed.

The majority of students who engage in community service program report that they feel empowered by the experience (Boss, 1994). Through community service activities, adolescents can look beyond themselves and get involved with real life issues and concerns. This helps to establish a sense of worth, accomplishment, and success (Adams, 1993). An effective community service program encourages adolescents to become responsible and productive citizens and as a result develop leadership skills.

In addition to developing personal initiative and leadership skills (Maher, 1992), almost all students report that the experiences strengthen their self-confidence and their self-esteem (Boss, 1994).

Changes in personal development include the enhanced ability to help others and to develop new relationships. Miller (1994) proposed that “helping behavior is directly related to one’s perceptions of one’s own helping skills” (p. 382). These perceptions can then lead to the development of new relationships and increased self-esteem as a result. Middleton and Kelly (1996) found that “students also seemed to gain a more differentiated view of others. They reported an increase in empathy for others and a greater awareness of the life circumstances of people beyond their immediate family and social networks” (p. 141).

By combining community service with learning activities and reflecting on these experiences, students attain personal, social, and intellectual growth. Adolescents develop skills in decision making and problem solving, as well as interpersonal and critical thinking skills. They develop a sense of value for the work they do, the people they serve, and the contributions they can make to the communities in which they live; traits that are increasingly important to the employers they will seek to impress as well as the colleges where they seek admission. While many argue for the implementation of community service as a way to engage or remediate young people's lagging sense of responsibility, caring, and empathy, it is evident that these activities can do far more than this.

Components of Community Service Programs

Preparation

In choosing the project and preparing for the activity or series of activities, it is important to remember that these activities must enable adolescents to perform "real" services for which they are held accountable. In addition, there should be a strong learning component, with opportunities for training or orientation and reflection led by sensitive adults. Haugsby (1991) stressed that

Each experience should have the qualities of being mutually-rewarding, self-contained and immediate. The learning experience should contain some intrinsic value and some immediate reward. Experiences should be total, coherent, and complete with learning experiences capable of producing its own sense of form, relationship, connectedness, unity and completeness. (p. 106)

The experience should have a well defined beginning and end, as well as provide the service provider with a sense of achievement and closure. The chosen project is more likely to be successful if students have had some input into the selection of the service site and the activity itself. There is a greater probability of a successful match between the student and the receiving agency. "Only in sites where the community staff both developed the material and worked on it with students was there more effective implementation of the educational activities" (Shumer & Belbas, 1996, p. 219). At sites where the curriculum was transmitted by someone else, the quality level of learning was lower.

The typical community service activity is limited to such things as taking students on a trip to a nursing home once a year to sing Christmas carols or to serve a holiday meal. There is nothing wrong with this, except that it could be so much more. It could happen more frequently or after an instructional unit on the elderly. Many times, the orientation and logistics keep the organizers of community service projects tied down. With each project, there needs to be some type of orientation or lesson which prepares the students for the setting in which they will be providing service. There are also logistics of the project itself to overcome; such as scheduling with a limited amount of time, transportation, parental permission and support, enabling the number of students interested to participate, and administrative support.

Curriculum Integration

"Academic payoffs of having students engage in community service are substantial when the service activity is integrated with traditional classroom instruction. The key work

here is integrated” (Markus, Howard, & King, 1993, p. 417). The term for this integration is service-learning as addressed previously in this paper.

Service-learning is distinguishable from community service and volunteerism in that it requires a deliberate connection between service and academic learning and is accompanied by thoughtful reflection on the service experience. Service-learning is different from a one-day project because these projects are specifically designed to meet curriculum goals. These projects serve as an integral part of the learning in the classroom, not just as an add-on. Examples of integrated curriculum in math would be to collect grocery coupons for a local food bank or raise money to purchase and install smoke detectors in all homes in a neighborhood (Wolfe, 1996). For integrating community service with social studies, freshmen could visit a senior citizens’ home to discuss historical events residents experienced, such as the Great Depression. Students would gain first-hand knowledge of history and the aging process. Seniors, in return, feel valued as they share their knowledge, and joy as they share companionship with the young people. Examples of service-learning activities are endless; the only limitation is a creative mind. President Clinton in his speech at Rutgers University (March 1, 1993) said (cited in Markus, Howard, & King, 1993, p. 417), “community service enriches education because students not only take the lessons they learn in class out into the community, but bring the lessons they learn in the community back into the classroom.” Following the activity which integrated community service with a curriculum area, the process of reflection needs to occur.

Reflection

The process of reflection “provides structured opportunities for people to reflect critically on their service experience” (Kraft, 1996, p. 138). This process encourages the student who engages in service to think about what he or she has done, write down impressions, and then hopefully receive feedback on these observations. Through questioning and reflection, participants integrate their community service learning experiences into their understanding of the world.

Community service learning also challenges the way students think about other people by bringing them into contact with people they might otherwise never get to know. Students will need help in understanding the differences and injustices received by the various populations, as well as help in making sense of their predispositions. “Exercises which encourage students to reflect on their service work and the different moral issues in their lives increase students’ self-awareness as well as their moral sensitivity to the community around them” (Boss, 1995, p. 23).

This reflective component allows for intellectual growth and the development of skills in critical thinking. It is “most useful when it is intentional and continuous throughout the experience, and then opportunity for feedback is provided. Ideally, feedback will come from persons being served, as well as from peers and program leaders” (Kendall, 1991, p. 96). There are many methods for reflection. Discussion is one way to consider the arguments that justify conclusions that conflict with the adolescent’s predispositions and self-interest (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996). Writing in journals provides one of the most popular means for students to reflect upon their service experience and their own personal growth. Artistic displays or presentations can also be methods of reflection. In fact, many educators

defend community service-learning activities to school boards and outside groups by emphasizing student reflection and teacher assessment to assure high quality learning experiences (Jones, Maloy, & Steen, 1996).

Building Support for Program

“You will find, as you go through life, that when we make others happy we find happiness ourselves. The feeling of doing something for someone else gives the young adolescent student a feeling of being worthwhile” (Adams, 1993, p. 54). In a world where many educators and policy makers are looking for hard facts such as higher test scores, such personal assessments may appear inconsequential and inadequate (Jones, Maloy, & Steen, 1996). It is of utmost importance, then, to document activities through journals, project logs (formal books that keep track of hours of service, tasks performed, personal observation, and insight), learning logs, letters of support, photos, slide shows and videos, artifacts, site visits, portfolios, or panel discussions. Furthermore, the director of the community service program should publicize in local newspapers, through public service announcements, leaflets, brochures, posters, art displays, or newsletters. Publicity may be of an event or and information table at another school-related event. Most importantly, the director must take time to celebrate completed community service projects.

Conclusion

Community service programs reflect responses to John F. Kennedy’s famous challenge to U.S. citizens: “Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.” Youth leadership development within community service allows teenagers to serve others, to lead, and to contribute to society in ways that support positive roles,

personal values, and communal beliefs in justice and equality. Ideally, community service-learning builds supportive structures for youth leaders, encourages positive dialog around new relationships, and empowers others as competent and purposeful individuals. There is no denying that voluntary service is fast becoming an integral part of the secondary and collegiate educational experience. It is too early to predict the long-term impact of service learning on educational reform. Only time and well-prepared community service activities will tell the tale of the effects these programs have on today's youth. Learning is not merely answering a teacher's questions to get a grade, but asking oneself questions to understand and to know what to do. When learning is from real life, and the consequences are real, one may have to question the surface appearance, the easy answer, and grapple with the deeper complexities of life and relationship.

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